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AUTHOR Carducci, Dewey J.; Carducci, Judith B.
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ABSTRACT

Aspects of W. Glasser's Control Theory are applied to the education of behaviorally disordered students. It is believed that stimulus/response theory and tools are inadequate with this population and that the stress should be on understanding internal motivating forces. The caring classroom, an approach which emphasizes ways to meet both the students' and the teacher's needs in the classroom environment, is described, and its connections with control theory noted. Students learn why they behave as they do, that they choose their behavior, and how to behave more effectively to meet their needs. A case illustration is provided to portray the teacher's and student's role in solving behavior problems. (CL)

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The Use of Control Theory in the Caring Classroom

Dewey J. Carducci, M.Ed.

Judith B. Carducci, M.S.S.W.

The Council for Exceptional Children

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The Use of Control Theory in the Caring Classroom

When we wrote The Caring Classroom in 1984, we described a model which harmonized various strategies to create a classroom in which students have as much opportunity as possible to develop a repertoire of organized effective behavior, where cognitive and affective education are not only equally important but are inextricably bound together, and where students can learn to take responsibility for themselves and their own lives. Central to the model are mutual respect among teacher and students, caring concern for self and others, the concept that problems are opportunities for growth and learning rather than something to avoid, dread, or get rid of, and that control by others is appropriate only until the person can assume responsibility for control of self. Essential to the underlying philosophy of the model is the belief that we do not change others, but may help and support another's efforts to change himself. This model was developed over years of reading, study and practice, and we do not believe in panaceas: we are always looking for ideas and tools to make teaching more effective and relevant. When we read William Glasser's work on Control Theory, therefore, we welcomed it as compatible with the model and could readily see it

as a possible strategy for enriching the model, and could see how the model would provide an ideal setting for its use.

Although Control Theory in itself is not new, Glasser has described it so clearly and packaged it so well that it was not only clear to us but it is also easily teachable to troubled students, and we would like to share with you how and why it can be used by teachers and students in gaining insight and taking more effective control of their lives. We see three general ways Control Theory can be applied in the Caring Classroom model in teaching SBH students: 1) by the teacher in understanding himself and his student better, and how both can interact with each other to meet their needs; 2) by the teacher in consulting with others, faculty or team, to adopt an appropriate intervention or plan to help a student; 3) by the teacher with students so the students can understand themselves and others and thereby choose more effective behaviors, and therefore have more control over their lives.

It is not an uncommon experience for us teachers to be puzzled about our own and our students' behavior. We can wonder, "Why did I react that way?" and "Why does he do that? What's going on?" One of the most frequent questions we hear from teachers troubled by difficult students and classroom disruption is, "What is going on

in their (students') minds?" Students themselves (especially adolescents, exceptional or not) frequently are a huge mystery to themselves and find others an equally frustrating mystery. They think they are victims of others' or their own impulses and have no idea that they are volitional beings and can therefore make new and different choices. The knowledge of Control Theory is usable insight for us, for our colleagues, and for our students.

Concepts; importance of clarity and consistency with theory

First, let us clarify some concepts and recognize that we educators may hold opposite or conflicting beliefs and different models based on those beliefs. Mixing strategies that stem from conflicting theories results in confusion and, rather than a synergy in which compatible tools potentiate each other, a discouraging situation in which our efforts may cancel each other out. Sometimes we assume incorrectly that we are sharing the same beliefs and point of view. For example, one can attend meeting after meeting, conference after conference, in which our colleagues talk about how "we can motivate our students" or "change our students," and we hear such phrases as "You make me angry" or "He made me do it" or "I have to..." Such statements reflect a stimulus-response (S/R) theory, probably the theory most educators either consciously or unconsciously espouse. It

postulates that human beings behave in response to external stimuli and that we can make others do what we want by doing something to them. Tokens, praise, insults, grades, Assertive Discipline, suspension, threatening to send a student to the office, smile stickers, etc., are all examples of S/R elements in which a response by the student to a stimulus is expected or hoped for.

Control Theory inconsistent with S/R theory and tools

We want to make clear that we do not believe in S/R theory, first because we do not believe it accurately describes how people function and second because we do not believe it is effective in the long run. What is "the long run"? How long is a life? We take the view that education is a lifelong process and the school teacher, not being present over the lifespan of the student, must think in terms of the student's becoming able to take over control of his own life and learning.

We believe that the opposite of S/R theory is more accurate: namely that people behave as a result of powerful internal motivating forces (needs, which are genetic and universal), and then act on the outside world which, rather than being a source of stimuli, is a vast array of resources that the person can use to meet his needs. This view is called Control Theory.

Control Theory - summary

In brief, Control Theory proposes that all human beings are alike (regardless of age, sex, color, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education, etc.) in having five general needs: 1) physical survival needs (for air, food, water, etc.), 2) for belonging/love, 3) for power/recognition (significance), 4) for freedom, and 5) for fun. These needs are universal and built into the genetic package inherited by all human beings. They are unchanging: we have them all our lives. Whereas all people have the same needs, we differ in our specific individual wants (what Glasser calls "the pictures in our heads"), which are the ways we individually perceive meeting these needs. For example, one person may "want" to have fun by bowling whereas another may want to go fishing. Wants, unlike needs, are flexible and changeable. If they were not, we would not be able to develop new and different tastes or interests. What was fun to a child (making mudpies, for example) would still be the way he would seek to have fun as an adult. And if he were jilted by his first love he would be doomed forever to unrequited love because he would be unable to want anyone else.

Behavior (which has three components: 1) feeling, 2) thinking, and 3) doing) is the means by which we actualize the wants to fulfill the needs - that is, how we make the wants come true. Through behavior, our internal

world acts on the external world to meet our needs. Behavior is not merely an impulsive reaction; although our feelings and thoughts are not visible to the external world, they exist. We are emotional and volitional beings. We problem-solve and make decisions and choices. Behavior can be either effective or ineffective, but never stops: a person keeps behaving all his life to meet his needs. Inasmuch as motivation and behavior spring from within, we can both choose and control and change how we behave. Behavior, like wants, is flexible. If our behavior results in more satisfaction than frustration, it is effective. If it results in more frustration than satisfaction, it is ineffective. The problem of the SBH student is that he does not have a repertoire of effective behaviors. He knows how to fight and manipulate or run away or depress, but he doesn't know how to evaluate alternatives or problem-solve, negotiate, talk things over, or assert his feelings, beliefs, and wants in effective ways. He usually makes the mistake of thinking that behavior that results in immediate gratification of a want (such as stealing money) is fulfilling a need, whereas in the long run it is resulting in frustration of needs (rejection, loss of freedom...). The presumption is that SBH teachers have a repertoire of effective behaviors and can teach them.

Practical results of applying Control Theory

This theory provides a useful shorthand, a focus for understanding what is going on both with ourselves and our students, and helps to see things in better perspective, to set priorities. For example, an overabundance of time is not spent on talking about feelings. They are acknowledged and respected, but not dwelt on. Because feelings are not as much under the student's control as what he does, more focus is placed on what one is doing to get his needs met. Furthermore, we do not listen to how a student's feelings and actions are "caused" by what somebody else did. Now we are much more involved in discussing the fact that the student chooses his behavior and can choose to do something different. Even behavior that has become so habitual as to be almost automatic is still chosen. (Note: Behavior which occurs under the influence of drugs or an addictive or biochemically altered state of consciousness is not under a person's control. To choose differently, one must have an awareness and knowledge of the existence of choices.)

Now a prime concern is how the student can get his needs met in the classroom environment, and how I, the teacher, can get my needs met in this environment. The teacher's needs are just as important as the students' needs. Any model that emphasizes one over the other results either in teacher burnout or stunted growth of

students. We share the environment and have the same needs, but differ in what we want and how we go about getting it. In this respect, the classroom is the world in microcosm. Thus an essential thing to teach is how to negotiate to get our needs met since we live in a world where the pictures in our heads conflict.

What we did in the Caring Classroom is create an environment in which such learning can take place. Control Theory gives us a tool for teaching students something important that they can use all their lives: 1) why they behave as they do (it is not a mystery), 2) that they choose their behavior (it is under their control), and 3) how to behave more effectively to meet their needs. It is important to have a philosophy in which such didactic teaching is relevant, and an environment in which it is not just talk but in which learning and practicing effective behavior can actually take place. This means taking risks and viewing problems as opportunities to examine behaviors, and using the classroom as a laboratory in which students can try on new ideas and behavior. It means refusing to become a cop or an oppressor. It means being a realist, recognizing that outside the classroom is the world of the halls, the principal's office, the parents and parent-surrogates, and our own colleagues, where S/R theory generally holds sway. And it means being an optimist and not giving up

easily, and having the courage of one's convictions.

Case Illustration

Mark, 16, has come to the special classroom with a history of school failure and violent behavior. Schools in the past have made a deal with him: "We'll pass you if you don't show us your problems."

Mark's wants (the pictures in his head)

Mark comes to school because he has friends and admirers there. He spends his time socializing; the halls and classrooms have become an extension of the street, where Mark controls for status - meeting his need for recognition and significance by being "cool," having followers, "making out." He long ago ceased perceiving of school as a place where adults are need-fulfilling or where education (the academic learning process) is need-fulfilling.

Affective-educational goal

Since Mark will not spend his energy doing something he does not believe is worthwhile (that is, will not pursue a picture that does not exist in his head but exists only in somebody else's), our goal is to encourage him to bring back the picture (that almost all children have originally) of education being need-fulfilling, of himself as a learner.

The Caring Classroom environment supports the goal

The Caring Classroom is designed to be a place in which students can meet their needs: Mark enters a classroom in which students are grouped in triads, in which three students work closely together helping each other academically and supporting each other emotionally, encouraging and caring about each other and problem-solving together, developing a relationship of belonging. There is opportunity for freedom to make one's own decisions so long as others' rights are not infringed, to experiment with new behavior without being criticized, to be creative and not be put down. There is power in mastery of self and academic material and being able to help others. And there is fun: since the structure of the triads allows for sharing of power, the teacher is not uptight and anxious about his control, does not fear students' "taking advantage" if he allows playfulness and spontaneity. Mark sees teacher and students enjoying each other and laughing together.

The teacher explains the important basics of the classroom to Mark: 1) how the triads work as a problem-solving helping group with the guidance of the teacher, 2) that problems are not sent to the principal but are dealt with where they occur and belong - in the class, 3) that the teacher will not allow anyone to disrupt anyone else's education, and 4) that the teacher is there

to teach and will not allow himself to become a cop.

The reality of the classroom conflicts with Mark's picture

Mark not only finds himself in a new and different situation, but one that is puzzling as well. It seems to him that what the teacher has said is contradictory: How, he wonders, can the teacher not allow someone to be disruptive without becoming a cop or sending the culprit to the office?

The unfamiliar is uncomfortable and Mark tries to cast it in the framework that he understands. What he expects is not what he gets. This classroom is not like the picture in his head which is: "I'm here to be cool; I'll stay out of your way, and you'll let me alone."

Mark's and the teacher's wants conflict

The trouble here is that the teacher has a very different picture: that Mark will be involved and will learn. This picture is related to the teacher's need for significance which is met by teaching and seeing students learn and grow. Both Mark's and the teacher's needs are going to be met or frustrated within the classroom which is where they both spend so much of their time together and which is a microcosm of the world. Since the world does not change for anyone, the teacher will not manipulate the classroom environment to satisfy Mark's picture.

Mark's behavior is ineffective (does not meet his needs)

A dilemma therefore exists: how are both sets of

pictures going to come true? Mark, as he begins to test, to pursue his picture, and the teacher does not leave him alone, becomes increasingly frustrated, and - as in the past - acts out violently. His behavior is so extreme as to require that he be removed from class. (How this is done is described in detail in chapter 3 of The Caring Classroom, and space does not permit our describing it here except to state that the process involves offering the student simple choices, depending on the seriousness of his behavior: If his behavior is not such as to require immediate removal, the student may be asked to make a commitment to an appropriate behavior; or he may be asked to use a time-out area within the classroom until he can make the commitment; or he may be instructed to use, or be taken to, a holding area outside the classroom until he can make the commitment. If his behavior is violent or he is unwilling to use the above choices, he is removed from school altogether and a conference is held for design of an appropriate plan - as was done in Mark's case. This process is consistent with Control Theory in giving the student maximum opportunity to exercise choice and self-control, and giving him appropriate information about the existence of choice and acceptable alternative behavior. The expectation is that he is able or soon will be able to control himself and to make appropriate choices.)

The teacher consults in Control Theory terms

The teacher uses Control Theory terms to clarify for administrators, other staff, and parent-surrogates what is going on, why Mark is behaving as he is, that he chooses his behavior and can learn to choose differently, and what the plan is to help him choose more effectively: Mark can return to class when he is willing to negotiate a solution with the teacher for how both can begin to meet their needs. He must come back to the teacher for this, and others (principal, counselors, etc.) cannot solve the problem because it is not their needs that are at issue in this situation.

The teacher helps Mark understand the conflict and negotiate

Mark does not yet know how to negotiate. The teacher explains to him how each of them comes to the classroom with his own needs and wants. The teacher acknowledges to Mark that he knows Mark wants to be cool, to make out in the halls, to be admired by his peers. He accepts this and is not judgmental about it. He shows that he has noticed Mark and knows something about him and is not put off by him or threatened by Mark's behavior and wants. He points out, however, that he too has a need to feel worthwhile and important, and to do that he wants to see students learning and taking responsibility. The question is, how can they work it out that each gets what he wants?

The details of such negotiations, of course, vary

with different teachers and students and circumstances. The important issue is that each recognizes and accepts and respects the other's needs and wants, and gives a little. The teacher starts with Mark where he is (meeting his needs for status and belonging by being "cool") and expects that as Mark lives up to his part of the negotiation, by becoming involved in the classroom structure and process, he will learn other more satisfying ways to fulfill his needs, enriching his repertoire. The whole classroom structure supports this, so it is not all a weighty responsibility on the teacher's shoulders. Mark can make mistakes in the process because in the classroom problems are opportunities and students who are further along in their personal and academic growth can help others, and in so doing, meet their needs for belonging, power, freedom, and fun. A beginning has been made, and Mark will begin to change his pictures.

Teaching Control Theory to SBH students

Our experience has been that Control Theory is easily taught and easily grasped even by very beset and psychologically unsophisticated people and that it boosts their self-awareness to a new level of "usable insight." It assists them in making sense of others' behavior and in deciding how to respond to it. They no longer view themselves as helpless victims or view their own behavior

as an uncontrollable reaction to others. Characteristically, acting-out students see themselves as powerless victims of an uncaring and depriving world which "happens" to them, and they explain their behavior likewise as something that "happens" to them as a response over which they have no more control than they have over the world.

In the Caring Classroom, students are taught to notice their behavior and identify behavior which hurts themselves or others. They use a tool called "checking" which means "stop and notice what you are doing," and are asked, "How is that helping you?" Control Theory helps to answer the natural question, "Helping to do what?" The answer is, "Helping to meet your needs," and the student can then go on to consider what need(s) the behavior in question was directed toward, and then to consider what behavior might be more effective, given the resources available in the environment and the conflicting or corresponding wants of the others sharing that environment. Talking it over with the goal of negotiating a mutually satisfactory solution is the most usual effective behavior in social situations.

Control Theory can be taught to SBH students in several different ways: 1) in one-to-one student/teacher sessions because of an individual student's special need at a particular time - as in the case of Mark, or a stu-

dent who asks for help privately with a special crisis;
 2) as part of the curriculum in a formal, planned, deliberate way with the triads, in which they are taught the concepts, to notice the range of behaviors being exhibited by themselves and their peers, to identify the behavior with the need, recognize the wants, evaluate whether the wants are realistic and attainable, and whether the behavior is effective or ineffective and - if ineffective - what to do about it; and 3) as the focus of an extracurricular activity group in which interested students on a voluntary self-selection basis come together outside class hours for the explicit purpose of learning how to take effective control of their lives - and indeed that is the title of the activity.

Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" poses one of the major dilemmas of life when it asks:

God, grant me the serenity
 To accept the things I cannot change,
 Courage to change the things I can,
 And the wisdom to know the difference.

SBH students have often suffered grievously from things they cannot change. Their teachers and they wish to change what they can, but are often in the dilemma described in the prayer: what is changeable? Control Theory gives us the wisdom the prayer beseeches - to know the difference. We cannot change others but we can change ourselves. Teachers can change how they teach and encour-

age, and students can change their thinking and adopt more effective need-fulfilling behavior. Control Theory can help us see how, and the Caring Classroom model is an ideal milieu for supporting the process.

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